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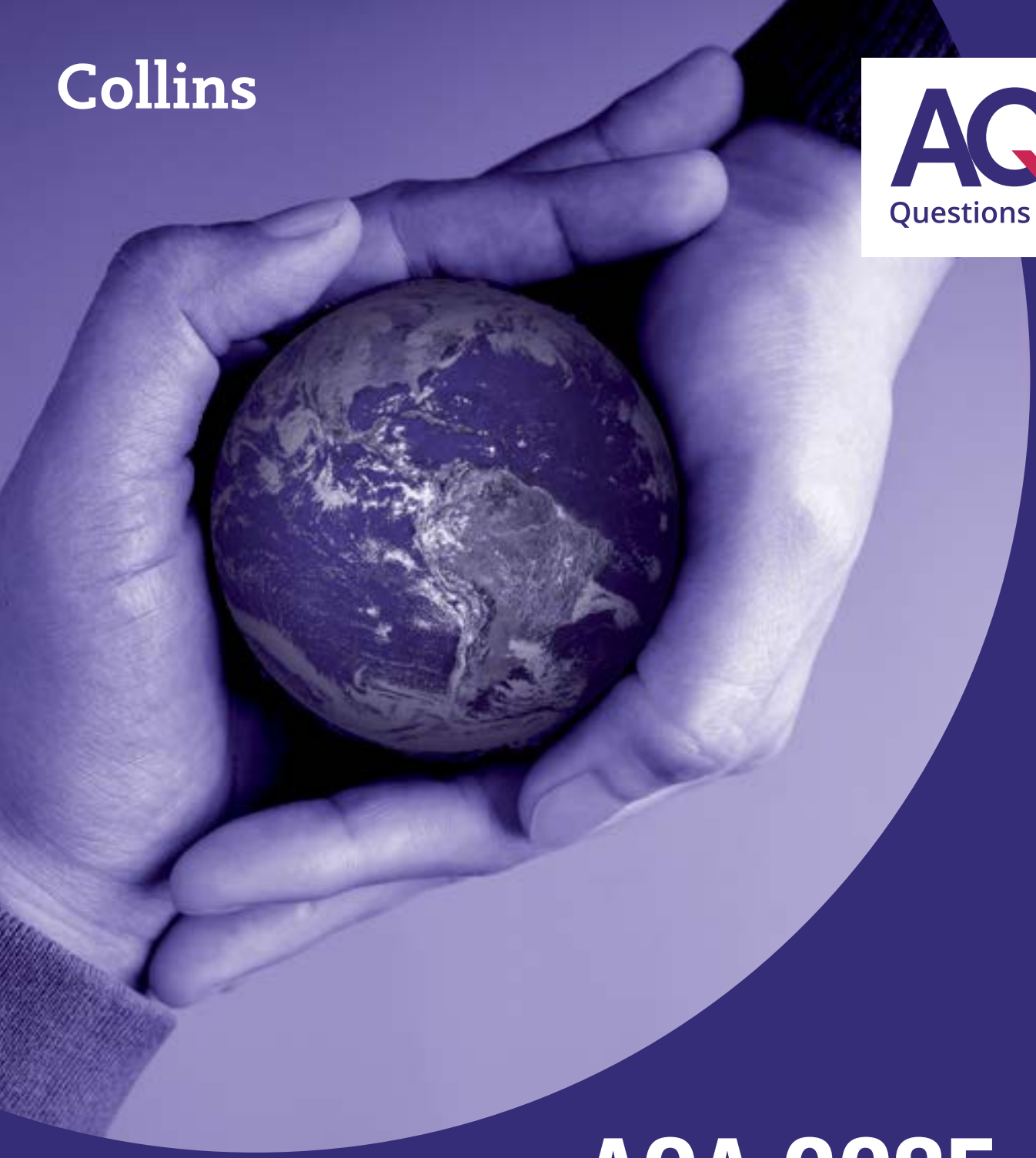

AQA
Questions matter

AQA GCSE English Literature

Worlds and Lives

Poetry Cluster

Teacher Guide

About this Teacher Guide

Collins is a major publisher of educational resources committed to supporting a more diverse and inclusive educational landscape in which students can learn and see their lives reflected. This booklet has been published in collaboration with AQA, the UK's largest examination board for GCSEs and A levels.

As part of its *Spark Something* campaign, AQA has committed to making its GCSE English Literature set text offering more balanced and inclusive. It has introduced new texts to its GCSE English Literature specification, including this *Worlds and Lives* poetry cluster, that offer a more diverse and inclusive experience of literature.
Visit www.aqa.org.uk/spark-something to find out more about these changes, the new texts and poetry collection.

This resource is a guide for teachers intending to teach the new *Worlds and Lives* poetry cluster by supporting them with their understanding of the poems in preparation for exploration with students in the classroom.

For each poem in the collection we've provided some brief background on the poet; a summary analysis with reference to themes and images; and comment on the structure. We've also suggested some questions as a starting point for discussion, as well as links to other poems to enrich students' study.

It must be stressed that the analyses and interpretations in this guide are not to be treated as definitive – they serve as a starting point and springboard for yours and your students' study of the collection. When teaching the AQA GCSE English Literature course, you must refer to AQA's specification as your definitive source of information.

A wide range of other useful resources can be found on the relevant subject pages of AQA's website: www.aqa.org.uk

Contents

Introduction to *Worlds and Lives* poetry collection **4**

Considerations when teaching poetry **5**

Approaches to poetry analysis **6**

Approaches to poetry comparison **8**

Lines Written in Early Spring – William Wordsworth 9

England in 1819 – Percy Bysshe Shelley 10

Shall earth no more inspire thee – Emily Brontë 11

In a London Drawingroom – George Eliot 12

On an Afternoon Train from Purley to Victoria, 1955 – James Berry 13

Name Journeys – Raman Mundair 14

pot – shamshad khan 15

A Wider View – Seni Seneviratne 16

Homing – Liz Berry 17

A Century Later – Imtiaz Dharker 18

The Jewellery Maker – Louisa Adjoa Parker 19

With Birds You're Never Lonely – Raymond Antrobus 20

A Portable Paradise – Roger Robinson 21

Like an Heiress – Grace Nichols 22

Thirteen – Caleb Femi 23

Introduction to *Worlds and Lives* poetry collection

The *Worlds and Lives* anthology offers a diverse collection of poems with a particular focus on modern voices.

The title of the anthology summarises its main theme of people and how they respond to the physical or social world around them. Some poems centre around individual struggles whilst others explore much wider issues in our world, from inequality and oppression to climate change and systemic racism.

With poems from the Romantic movement to ones published in the twenty-first century, there is also a theme of social change running through the anthology. This will hopefully capture young people's attention as they start making their own independent steps in life and take on the task of shaping our society.

The voices in the collection show that one thing we have in common is that we are all different. Students will be able to explore how a wide range of influences shape our identities: migrancy, regional difference, sexuality, disability, class, cultural heritage, gender and race.

The poems encourage young people to consider the world around them and how they engage with, or perceive, others.

Considerations when teaching poetry

Getting started

Students are often less comfortable with poetry, possibly because it is a form that they see far less frequently than prose or because of how densely packed and figurative a poem can seem. Some students also come with preconceived ideas that poetry is in some way effeminate or pointless; if this is the case, think about which poems to start with so you can challenge that view, perhaps drawing on how socially conscious many young people are (for example, you could look at the revolutionary spirit of *England in 1819*, race and equality in *Thirteen*, the climate awareness of *Like an Heiress*, links to real events in *A Century Later* or find a funny, or disturbing unseen poem of your choice).

Reading aloud

A key way to engage students with poetry is through the reading. Don't feel silly practising the poems at home before you read them with your class. Also look out for videos of poets reading their own work or recitations by actors. Encourage students to read the poems aloud themselves, and get them used to reading to the punctuation rather than stopping at the end of each line (which can be one of the reasons why students sometimes think that poems 'don't make sense').

Particularly with older poems, try to help the students to see the skill of metre and the different rhythms that can be created. As a simple way to get them to understand how difficult something like iambic pentameter is to achieve, write their full names on the board and underline where the stresses fall; then get them to try to pronounce their names with the stresses in the *wrong* place.

Keeping an open mind

It is important to be open to multiple interpretations but also to ensure that a student's ideas are clearly rooted in the text (rather than simply being based on their feelings or on a reaction to an isolated word). Otherwise, they will become frustrated when they come to write formally about the texts.

To ensure that the exploration of a poem is well founded, it's a good idea to start with the words. Words and images carry meaning so this is how they will unlock what they think the poem is about. Invite students to then consider how other aspects of the poem – form, structure, techniques of sound – are helping to emphasise or draw together those meanings. Similarly, it can be a good idea to bring in background information later, giving students the chance to build up their personal response before they place their ideas in the poem's context.

Try to be open to the different obstacles that students are finding with poetry and reassure them that they do not need to understand or analyse every single word. Sometimes, seeing them as little puzzles to unravel can help students feel less daunted by poems and open their eyes to the brilliance of the form.

Approaches to poetry analysis

Variety

When analysing poetry with a class, the main thing to remember is that – like all literature – there is no set way to analyse a poem. Try a variety of methods as this will keep the exploration of poetry fresh while also allowing students to find ways they prefer to explore (which will help them when they encounter previously unseen poems).

Whatever method you're using with a class, encourage them to think about what the writer is exploring, how they are conveying their ideas, and why they may have written the poem. Encourage students to read poems more than once rather than making a snap judgement or immediately finding the poetic form an obstacle.

Three reads

One useful method for exploring poems is *three reads*. This can be done by making notes in three boxes, writing inside a triangle that has been divided into three, or being given word limits such as 10, then 50, then 100. You can also decide whether you're exploring impressions or delving deeper into the text.

If you're exploring impressions, the first read should be followed by students noting down their initial thoughts or reactions; it's important to make it clear that there's no right or wrong at this point! After their second read, they should write some observations or questions about the poem and then share them with the class. Finally, after their third read, the students should work in pairs or small groups to decide on meanings in the poem and key images that support their ideas.

If you're delving deeper, ask students to come up with a summary or overview of what they think the poem is about after their first read; it's okay for them to amend this as the task continues. After the second read, encourage them to pick out key images that are suggesting these ideas. Then, once the poem has been read for a final time, ask the students to explore the impact of specific words within the images that they picked out (always linking them back to their initial overview).

Redacted poetry

Another good strategy is the 'redacted' method; this works best using a projector. Present the students with a redacted version of the poem (or simply change the text to a white font), only allowing them to read the title. Using a discussion structure like 'think>pair>share', ask them to consider what the poem might be about and their initial reactions.

Then, present them with a second version of the poem for similar discussion. Keep some of it redacted but allow them to see some individual words (ideally, choose ones that link to a specific theme so they can begin to see motifs across a text; words that signal a tone change can also be interesting for them to explore). After this, present them with a third redacted version for discussion where those words can now be seen as part of bigger images. Ask the class to explain how their understanding of the poem is building up through the language.

Finally, show the completely unredacted poem and ask students to explore how the ideas they'd identified are being connected across the poem, as well as any other ideas that the poet is introducing.

Guided annotation

A third method to try is 'guided annotation'. Give the students a larger copy of the poem (for example on A3) and encourage them to make use of different coloured pens for highlighting and note-making. Then give them a series of aspects to explore; you could give them all at once or two to three at a time. For example:

1. Underline words you don't understand and use a dictionary to define their meaning.
2. Circle words that create a [specify, based on the poem] tone.
3. Using different colours, highlight imagery that you find (similes, metaphors, personification, vivid descriptions) and annotate what they are conveying.
4. Highlight any different senses being employed and note down their impact.
5. Circle any powerful verbs and note down their effect.
6. Look back at the title and annotate how it is linking to the ideas that you are developing about the poem.

Approaches to poetry analysis – continued

7. Underline any uses of sound (alliteration, assonance/consonance, onomatopoeia) and note down whether they are helping to emphasise any of the ideas in the images you have highlighted.
8. Underline any particular uses of structure (short sentences, lists, patterns of three, anaphora, questions) and note down how they might emphasise the ideas in your highlighted images.
9. Use emojis to represent the tone or mood of a poem, and highlight any point when this shifts.

Whatever methods you decide to use, encourage students to debate meaning. It isn't true that there are no wrong answers in poetry; however, there are plenty of different correct answers. Welcome alternative interpretations and the idea that a poet might be saying two things at once (or just letting the reader make up their own mind).

Approaches to poetry comparison

Making connections

Even when you are teaching an individual poem, it is good practice to encourage students to consider possible connections with other texts. This could be other poems in the cluster or other aspects of literature that you have covered on the course.

Connections can be made in terms of the meanings being conveyed in texts and how that is being achieved through the writers' craft.

Double bubbles

When you start teaching poetry comparison more explicitly, a 'double bubble' – or Venn diagram – is a good place to start. This reminds students that a comparison can cover both differences and similarities. Once they have some ideas in their bubbles, they can extract one and try to clearly evidence it.

To challenge them further, ask them to identify any similarities or differences within their evidence (the writer's use of language, structure, or form). Additionally, ask them to extend their initial comparison with a contrast or vice versa. For example, if they felt that both speakers found comfort in nature, can they also identify contrasting feelings that the speakers display about nature?

Modelling comparison

As you start moving students towards comparing the writers' craft, put in place steps that will help them to build up their comparison skills.

You might start by giving them a single quotation from each poem and a specific focus, such as 'both speakers feel like outsiders'. Ask them to deconstruct each quotation in relation to the statement, considering the effect of imagery and then individual words, as well how structure and features of sound are emphasising meaning. To develop their abilities, repeat the activity with a different focus but only give the students one quotation so they have to find a good match from the other poem.

It is also worthwhile modelling responses with students. Try to avoid enforcing a specific framework for an answer but giving students opening phrases and writing together can be very good for their confidence. Once you've got a class response written, don't be afraid to interrogate it: is there clear comparison; are meanings precisely explained; has terminology been used accurately; have they been able to link context to their ideas; is there room for further development or alternative interpretation? After the class are happy with their combined effort, they can use their model to help them write another paragraph in pairs or independently.

Lines Written in Early Spring – William Wordsworth

Background

Published in 1798, this is called a lyric poem as it conveys personal feelings. Wordsworth was a Romantic poet; the movement was inspired by nature but was also political and advocated social change. The poem links to Wordsworth's criticisms of the impact of the Industrial Revolution.

Key themes and images

The first two stanzas establish the key themes: harmony in nature and humankind's failure to follow its example. Harmony is conveyed through the image of 'a thousand blended notes', while the peace and happiness this brings is suggested by the verb 'reclined' and the noun phrases 'sweet mood' and 'pleasant thoughts'. Wordsworth uses contrasts, 'grieved my heart' and 'sad thoughts', to show his distress that humankind is not equally harmonious: 'What man has made of man'. He asserts that we are all part of nature (the personification and metaphor of lines 5–6), implying we should know better.

Stanzas 3–5 develop the idea of harmony and the repetition of the noun 'pleasure' conveys the joy this brings. Flowers, trees, and birds are described simply ('green', 'budding', 'hopped and played') but the flowers and trees are also personified and the birds described as having 'thoughts I cannot measure'; this could imply that people don't recognise the significance of nature and what we can learn from it.

The last stanza returns to Wordsworth's sadness (or 'lament') for humankind. He sees nature as having a 'holy plan' and being sent from 'heaven'; lines 5–6 would suggest he believes humankind is the same. However, he offers a rhetorical question (repeating line 8) to suggest that we are not following this plan and need to live more harmoniously.

Structure

The poem is arranged in quatrains with an alternate, abab, rhyme scheme; the first three lines of each stanza are in iambic tetrameter, with a fourth line of iambic trimeter. This regular rhythmic meter could help convey the harmony of nature and the idea of God's plan.

Suggested questions

- How can you tell the poet likes being surrounded by nature?
- How does the poet contrast nature and humankind?
- In what ways does the poet suggest humankind can learn from nature?

Other poems for comparison

- *Whinlands* – Seamus Heaney
- *The Smell of Chrysanthemums* – Elizabeth Jennings
- *Earth* – Derek Walcott

England in 1819 – Percy Bysshe Shelley

Background

Shelley was one of the most political Romantics and this poem was a response to the Peterloo Massacre.

Key themes and images

The first six lines criticise the monarchy. The opening list describes King George III and makes an allusion to Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Some of the adjectives have double meanings: 'blind' also accuses him of lacking social and political awareness while 'dying' also suggests the degeneration of the monarchy.

His criticism of George IV (then Prince Regent and notorious for his dissolute extravagance) is harsher. Alliteration of 'dregs' and 'dull' highlights the effect on the gene pool of royal dynasties intermarrying; this is emphasised by the references to water and mud. The leech metaphor suggests that his lifestyle exploits and ruins England ('fainting country'), and that this is all the royal family do until they die ('drop, blind in blood, without a blow'). A pattern of three ('neither see nor feel nor know') criticises the monarchy's ignorance and disregard for their people, with the metaphor 'flow through public scorn' suggesting they are unconcerned by public perceptions.

Lines 7–9 refer to the Peterloo Massacre. The verbs 'starved and stabbed' are alliterated to link the need for social change with the fate of those who demand it; the plosive sounds in line 7 could also represent violence. The army are described as killers of freedom ('liberticide') and the 'two-edged sword' could link to the biblical idea that "all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword", imagining a revolution avenging Peterloo.

Shelley describes the law as 'golden and sanguine', suggesting it misrepresents itself as looking after the country ('sanguine' can refer to the colour of dried blood); this is emphasised by the contrasting verbs 'tempt and slay'. The Church is depicted as corrupt, 'Christless, Godless', with the 'book sealed' indicating that religion is used to oppress. Metaphor presents parliament ('senate') as a failed law that should have been abandoned ('Time's worst statute, unrepealed'). These three institutions are linked to death ('graves') but the metaphor also implies that England will eventually revolt: 'a glorious Phantom may / Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day.'

Structure

The poem is written as a sonnet, subverting the form's traditional associations to courtly love.

Suggested questions

- How is the England of 1819 presented?
- How does the poem express a hatred of the establishment?
- In what ways can the poem be seen as patriotic?

Other poems for comparison

- *Politics* – Carol Ann Duffy
- *I, Too* – Langston Hughes
- *An Unexpected Guest* – Simon Armitage

Shall earth no more inspire thee – Emily Brontë

Background

Emily Brontë is linked to both the Romantic movement and the Victorian era. Written in 1841, the poem encourages someone to let nature improve their state of mind. It can be seen as a dramatic monologue with the speaker being a personification of nature; the addressee could be an individual or representative of humanity as a whole.

Key themes and images

The person being addressed is clearly unhappy; the opening line suggests they lack inspiration. The first two stanzas develop this through metaphor, 'passion may not fire thee' and the description of their thoughts as 'regions dark'.

The addressee also seems to be philosophical or perhaps a poet. This isolates them from others and they are called a 'lonely dreamer' and someone whose 'mind is ever moving'. This is returned to in the penultimate stanza where their temperament ('to wildly pine') is described as unusual ('few').

It is implied the addressee has become distanced from the speaker, geographically or emotionally. The speaker's wish to help is conveyed through rhetorical questions, 'Shall earth no more inspire thee?', and imperatives, 'Come back and dwell with me'. This is highlighted in stanza 3 by the verbs 'enchant and soothe'.

The speaker further offers solace through nature, 'my mountain breezes […] my sunshine pleases', with the rhyme scheme adding a sense of harmony. Nature as a healing power continues throughout the poem, such as 'let my winds caress thee' in the final stanza.

It is pointed out that the listener hasn't changed. Although they have a 'wayward will', they still yearn for the harmony of nature: 'evening blending […] thy spirit bending / In fond idolatry'. The speaker promises to 'drive thy griefs away' from the speaker. A persuasive tone is created by repetition, 'I know my mighty sway, / I know my magic power'; the final stanza continues this through repetition ('let') and imperatives such as 'Return and dwell with me'.

Structure

The uniformity of the poem matches the theme of nature being harmonious and bringing peace: the seven quatrains have an abab rhyme scheme and the rhythm is iambic. Each stanza's first and third lines have an additional unstressed syllable (a 'feminine ending'), perhaps to mirror the idea of the speaker soothing the listener.

Suggested questions

- How is nature presented as something that can improve a troubled life?
- In what ways could the speaker be seen as a real person or as a personification of nature?
- In what ways could the addressee be seen as an individual or humanity as a whole?

Other poems for comparison

- *Orkney/This Life* – Andrew Greig
- *Places We Love* – Ivan V. Lalic
- *Living* – Denise Levertov

In a London Drawingroom – George Eliot

Background

George Eliot was the pen name of Mary Ann Evans; she felt her work would be taken more seriously if she published as a male. She moved to London in 1850 and wrote this poem in 1865, criticising the city and showing sympathy for its population. Writers of the Victorian period often focussed on social realism and the importance of place.

Key themes and images

The poem opens with an image of pollution; the sky is 'yellowed by the smoke' of the factories taking over the industrialised city.

Eliot then focusses on the idea of darkness due to over-development and over-crowding. This is often achieved through simile: the buildings are 'like solid fog', and the streets are 'as in ways o'erhung / By thickest canvass', suggesting all light is being blocked. This is emphasised through the repetition of the noun 'shadow' and the metaphor, 'golden rays / Are clothed in hemp' as if a sack has been thrown over the city.

Eliot depicts urban development as an attack on nature through the violent image of houses 'cutting the sky'. A contrast between nature and industrialisation can be seen in the reference to 'monotony of surface & of form', implying the city is faceless and unnaturally similar.

The second half of the poem focusses more on how London's inhabitants are affected by the state of the city. They are constantly busy or stressed, 'All hurry on' and 'No figure lingering / Pauses […] / Or rest[s] a little'. They are despondent ('look upon the ground'), seeming almost soulless as they find nothing to 'feed the hunger of the eye'.

Eliot returns to the idea of the city lacking individuality or identity when she adds that people, 'glance unmarking at the passers by', as if no-one knows, or cares about, anyone else. Additionally, the endless traffic is all the same, 'cabs, carriages / All closed, in multiplied identity'.

The final three lines summarise London's problems: it lacks freedom and identity ('one huge prison-house'), is without happiness or feeling ('lowest rate of colour, warmth & joy'), and people constantly judge one another ('court'). The penultimate line, 'Where men are punished at the slightest cost', might also criticise England's lack of social care: it was easy for people to find themselves struggling financially and facing the workhouse, perhaps linking to the descriptions of everyone being focussed on their own busy lives and never resting.

Structure

The 19 lines are not broken into stanzas and the poem contains much enjambment. This creates a mood of relentlessness as the poem is always moving forward, without pause, matching the depiction of London's inhabitants. The rhythm of the iambic pentameter could also be emphasising the images of constant routine and lack of freedom.

Suggested questions

- How is London presented as lacking character and variety?
- How are people presented as being affected by their surroundings?
- What recurring images or ideas appear in the poem?

Other poems for comparison

- *Nightsong: City* – Dennis Brutus
- *i thank You God for most this amazing* – E. E. Cummings
- *This Room* – Imtiaz Dharker

On an Afternoon Train from Purley to Victoria, 1955 – James Berry

Background

Berry was born in Jamaica and moved to London in the 1940s (Purley and Victoria are areas in London). Mixing English and Jamaican patois, he often wrote about the triumphs and tensions of immigration; this poem's 1955 setting is important to understanding the interactions that take place. The poet also refers to Quakers, a religious group that has equality at its core; in communal worship, they wait in silence until they feel the spirit has moved them to contribute.

Key themes and images

The poem opens with surprise at a stranger's friendliness ('startled me'). This could link to the busyness of city life or to their differences: nationality, gender, religion. The repetition ('Nice day') and short sentence for the speaker's reply emphasise that he is not used to this kind of situation.

In contrast, the woman is more open and shares her feelings (the religious experience of being 'moved in silence / to speak'); she is given four lines of speech and the enjambment creates a lack of hesitancy. This impression of her returns at the end when she is described as 'So sincere she was beautiful'.

A connection between the two is established through the reference to 'racial brotherhood' (including some non-standard English – such as the lack of the preposition in line 3 – could suggest that, like Berry, she is not white). His type of response becomes more friendly as he asks a question.

The idea of a connection is increased by similar language. She talks of being 'moved' or 'inspired' and he repeats the adjective 'thoughtful' to describe himself, as if her inspiration inspires him. This is emphasised in the third stanza when he has a vision of 'empty city streets' merged with his 'father's big banana field', perhaps suggesting the isolation and homesickness that immigration can bring.

Their connection continues when she asks, 'Where are you from?', as if reading the thoughts he had in the previous stanza. However, she possibly displays unintentional racism in asking the question and this is heightened when she presumes Jamaica is part of Africa, causing him to joke that 'Ireland is near Lapland'.

Berry develops this combination of connection and difference. The two speakers have different ideas about Jamaica (she sees 'sunny' idealism whereas he displays a longing for change: 'snow falls elsewhere') but the final image, 'people sat down around us', appears to link them ('us') while highlighting their separation from others.

Structure

The poem is written in free verse; this lack of rhyme and metre matches the conversational style of the poem (and its everyday prosaic, rather than metaphorical, language). The four stanzas are used to separate different aspects of the conversation.

Suggested questions

- How does the poem convey a connection between the poet and the woman?
- What does the poem suggest about a person's sense of place?
- How significant is the time period? Would your ideas about the conversation change if it was set today?

Other poems for comparison

- *The Hug* – Tess Gallagher
- *In My Country* – Jackie Kay
- *Meeting and Passing* – Robert Frost

Name Journeys – Raman Mundair

Background

Mundair was born in India and moved to the UK when she was a child; she is disabled, neurodivergent, and identifies as Queer. This poem makes several references to Hinduism: the major deities of Rama and Sita, who were married, and the empress Draupadi.

Key themes and images

The first five couplets describe the poet's life through comparisons to figures in Hinduism.

She links herself to Rama, who faced many challenges ('felt the winderness'), indicating she has had a difficult life. This reappears in the metaphor 'chastened / through trial by fire', suggesting she has felt judged and punished. She adds that she has not been 'blessed' with a partner like Sita; the description of her as 'sweet' and the pattern of three, 'loyal, pure and true', suggest the poet's sadness at what is missing from her life.

By then comparing herself to Sita (the metaphor, 'spiritual sari-sisters entwined / in an infinite silk'), the poet asserts the importance of Hinduism to her identity and possibly praises sisterhood or feminism. The reference to Draupadi's 'blush' links to a story where men try to strip her naked, perhaps suggesting the poet's faith has aided her ('swathe' links to covering or protection) in a sexist world.

The poem then focusses on the poet's move from to England and how it affected her identity, metaphorically describing her name as 'a journey' and her life as 'woven tapestries of journeys'.

She again refers to life challenges through contrasting images of 'rough and smooth […] banyan leaves with sugar / cane'. One of these challenges was the need to learn a new language: her Punjabi is described as becoming 'dislodged' and landing on 'infertile English soil', suggesting her heritage was not valued. It was difficult ('toiled') to speak Mancunian English, just as English people struggled to pronounce her name ('a stumble / that filled English mouths'). The description of her name sounding like 'discordant rhyme' with its 'exotic / mystery dulled' suggests she was made to feel her background was ugly or not to be talked about.

This is developed in the final couplet when she describes her new life as 'void of history and memory', implying she felt an expectation to simply be English and forget her past.

Structure

This is a variation on a ghazal, a prominent form of poetry in the Indian subcontinent that often explores spiritual love or the pain of loss or separation. This matches the poem's themes of immigration and heritage. A ghazal is usually made up of individual couplets with a set rhythm but Mundair employs free verse and a lot of enjambment, perhaps linking to the poem's rejection of established structures such as patriarchy, dominant white culture, and heteronormativity.

Suggested questions

- What images of difference can you see in the poem?
- How is the speaker presented as having had a difficult life?
- How is language presented as important to one's identity?

Other poems for comparison

- *Search for my Tongue* – Sujata Bhatt
- *The Journey* – Mary Oliver
- *My Faithful Mother Tongue* – Czeslaw Milosz

pot – shamshad khan

Background

Shamshad Khan is a second generation British Asian from Manchester. This poem was commissioned for the city's museum and is written as a conversation with a Nigerian pot in their collection. The pot is used to explore cultural repatriation, colonialism, and migration; the dedication at the end also links the pot to prisoners who have been incarcerated 'without charge or access to legal representation' (as was happening at Guantanamo Bay when the poem was published in 2007).

Key themes and images

The opening lines describe the pot, 'so big […] so fragile'. It is implied these are excuses for not returning the pot: 'you shouldn't really be moved […] you might break'.

The speaker knows only 'half of the story' of how it reached England, perhaps referring to "whitewashed" historical narratives. The speaker's 'need' to know its true story, followed by the imperative 'tell me', indicates the importance of history to people's identities. Lines 12–22 present different euphemistic stories of its appropriation, using anaphora of 'or / did they say' to create a disbelieving tone. This is emphasised by juxtaposing 'bought' with 'looter', and the decreasing involvement of people (it might have been 'lost' or even smuggled *itself* on board, 'they didn't notice you […] must have slipped onto'). However, the 'white' boat going to 'England' reminds us of the truth of cultural theft.

The importance of cultural artefacts to their original country is asserted through images of loss, 'missed you […] looked for you'. This is emphasised by the list of verb phrases linking to the creation of the pot in lines 30–36. The speaker wishes to return it and the verb 'shatter' describes the display glass while also indicating a sense of outrage.

Using the pot to explore the identity of people with migrant heritages can first be seen in lines 5–6: it seems 'almost' English before the speaker adds, 'but I know you're not'. In line 40, the noun 'diaspora' (the spread of people from their homeland) is linked to the fear of losing one's cultural identity, 'you're not really one of us'. The speaker's experience of returning 'to where my family's from' and being welcomed (even joking that they 'said I was more asian than the asians') provides reassurance.

The poet draws together the themes of identity and cultural repatriation at the end of the poem, encouraging the pot to want to return home ('imagine') and asking it to respond ('growl if you hear me'). The final questions ('pot? / pot?') are given individual stanzas, creating pauses that push the audience to think about the ethical questions being raised (as if we are listening for the pot's response).

Structure

The poem is written in free verse and does not contain a clear stanza structure, perhaps to reflect the ideas of displacement, diaspora, and severed connections. Short lines, single-line stanzas, and anaphora are regularly used to emphasise ideas (and persuade the reader to agree with the poet).

Suggested questions

- How is the pot made to seem like a living person? What kind of life has it had?
- In what ways is the pot 'incarcerated'?
- How and why is uncertainty used within the poem?

Other poems for comparison

- *Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan* – Moniza Alvi
- *Cutty Sark* – Pete Morgan
- *Currency* – Jacob Sam-La Rose

A Wider View – Seni Seneviratne

Background

Seneviratne was born and raised in Leeds where this poem is set. She has Sri Lankan heritage and imagines her great-great-grandfather's experience of the growing, industrialised town in the nineteenth century compared to her own life in the modern day city.

Key themes and images

The first three stanzas focus on Leeds in 1869. The houses are cramped ('back-to-back'), there are outbreaks of 'cholera', and industrialisation has created a 'smoke-filled sky'. The metaphor 'stack his dreams' conveys her great-great-grandfather's wish to keep his family 'safe from harm' as well as, perhaps, his reasons for emigrating to Britain.

He works hard at the Temple Mill to achieve a better future, 'eyes dry with dust / from twelve hours combing flax', and this is emphasised by the reference to 'the limits of his working life'. A pattern of three, 'the din of engines, looms, and shuttles', builds up the noise of the works. The description of how he 'searched for spaces' perhaps contrasts the town with his upbringing in rural Ceylon and this is developed by the line, 'he craved the comfort of a wider view'.

The 'conicals of light' suggest he feels trapped working indoors but could also symbolise hope. The latter is also conveyed through metaphor when the mill's loudness is 'drowned' by the beautiful Italian-style architecture of the Tower Works steel factory ('tall octagonal crown' and, in stanza 5, 'gilded tiles, and Giotto's geometric lines'), providing some relief from the usual sights. It makes him imagine 'peals of ringing bells', implying freedom and happiness.

The last two stanzas focus on Leeds 'today' but a link in time is created through the 'Dark Arches' (an engineering achievement supporting the railway above) which were completed in 1869. Time is also symbolised by how her 'footsteps echo'.

Personification ('red-brick vaults / begin to moan') and metaphor ('time, collapsing') are used to depict the speaker and her great-great-grandfather being brought together. The Tower Works is the 'axis of our gaze', using a historical landmark to imply that all time exists simultaneously. This is developed through the metaphorical description of how 'the curve of past and future generations / arcs between us', to assert the importance of heritage to one's identity. This links to the title by suggesting that we are more than just our immediate, narrow existence.

Structure

The poet's ideas about time and identity may be reflected in how they have constructed the poem. The stanzas clearly separate the past from the present but the free verse and enjambment simultaneously reduce this sense of structure. There is also alliteration throughout, perhaps emphasising the concept of links between the past and the present.

Suggested questions

- How is 19th century Leeds presented?
- In what ways does the great-great-grandfather want 'a wider view'?
- What might this poem be suggesting about time and its effect on our identities?

Other poems for comparison

- *Mirror Image* – Louise Gluck
- *Places We Love* – Ivan V. Lalic
- *Ageism* – Benjamin Zephaniah

Homing – Liz Berry

Background

Berry was born and raised in the Black Country. Her work often celebrates the area, incorporating its dialect and accent. This poem is addressed to a dead relative (perhaps the speaker's mother or grandmother) who had been brought up to hide their accent.

Key themes and images

The first stanza establishes the extended metaphor of a locked box to represent hiding one's background, 'you kept your accent / in a box'. The phrases 'hours of elocution' and 'teacher's ruler across your legs' shows the relative was made to feel ashamed of their accent as a child (line 4 refers to being taught Received Pronunciation which had, and arguably still has, more status). The box's lock is 'rusted' to suggest the relative hid their accent all their life.

The negativity around the Black Country accent is suggested by the verb 'escape'. However, this is contrasted with the speaker's appreciation ('I loved its thick drawl'), indicating how attitudes to accents are changing. This is emphasised by the inclusion of the accent's key sounds: 'a guttural *uh* […] *g's* that rang.' Similarly, dialect words (for daft, cry, pebble, food, tea, and home) are included on lines 8 and 14.

The third stanza suggests the relative has died ('clearing your house') and returns to the box metaphor to suggest the speaker wants to honour the relative by celebrating their background: 'the only thing / I wanted was that box, jemmied open'. The use of 'only' and the forceful word 'jemmied' suggest the speaker's anger at how the relative was made to feel about their accent. There is a tone of both sadness and joy in the metaphor, 'let years of lost words spill out'.

The accent is described in vivid detail, finding beauty in sounds that some find ugly: the simile 'vowels ferrous as nails' and the metaphor 'consonants you could lick coal from'. The latter indicates the importance of accent to place and identity. This is emphasised in the list of landmarks, in lines 17–20, that metaphorically make up the accent, and continues with the image of the 'blacksmith's furnace' (the smoke from the ironworks is part of how the Black Country got its name).

The speaker's celebration of their relative continues with the wish to bring their voice back from the past, 'forge your voice / in my mouth', and 'shout it from the roofs'. The final simile links back to the title to reinforce the importance of background, or 'home', to people's identities.

Structure

The stanzas are used to separate different aspects of the poem. It is written in free verse and uses a lot of enjambment, perhaps to avoid traditional "rules" of poetry (matching the poem's rejection of traditional ideas about accents and dialect).

Suggested questions

- What is the extended metaphor of the locked box used to explore?
- How does the poem present negative and positive views of accents?
- Where are accents linked to a sense of place?

Other poems for comparison

- *I Cannot Remember My Mother* – Rabindranath Tagore
- *Death of an Irishwoman* – Michael Hartnett
- *The Six O'Clock News* (from *Unrelated Incidents*) – Tom Leonard

A Century Later – Imtiaz Dharker

Background

Dharker has described herself as a Scottish Muslim Calvinist, summarising the different influences on her identity. She was born in Pakistan, brought up in Scotland, and has lived in England, Wales, and India. This poem was published in 2014, the centenary of the First World War; it is a response to Wilfred Owen's *Anthem for Doomed Youth* and the experiences of Malala Yousafzai who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her education activism.

Key themes and images

The poem begins by mirroring the opening of Owen's poem ('What passing-bells for those who die as cattle?'); however, Dharker moves the setting to a school, depicting the challenges faced in some countries by girls seeking education. The assertion that 'the school-bell is a call to battle' acknowledges the fight needed for equality (and the violent backlash this can bring).

The girl being focussed on can be Malala, who was shot in the head in 2012 at the age of fifteen, but can represent any girl across the world. Walking to school is described metaphorically as 'a step into the firing line', while physical features ('fine skin', 'cheek still rounded from being fifteen') emphasise her innocence and vulnerability.

She is described as 'surrendered', as if handed over to her attackers, suggesting a lack of support from the authorities. This is followed by 'surrounded' to present her as outnumbered. However, an image of determination is created when she 'takes the bullet in the head' but 'walks on', and this is emphasised by the enjambment across two stanzas: despite the break, the line continues, creating an element of surprise as if the girl is invincible.

Metaphor, personification, and symbolism form a vision of a better future in stanza 3, with the images of nature in abundance perhaps suggesting the growth of people, ideas, and communities. The familiar image of poppies to commemorate dead soldiers implies sacrifices will need to be made.

The remainder of the poem has a more triumphant tone, describing how the girl has 'won' in contrast to the bullet which has 'failed'. A list builds up her victories, although the fact these seem commonplace ('wear bangles […] paint her fingernails, / go to school') adds pathos.

The mood of triumph increases as the protest builds, 'Behind her, one by one, / the schoolgirls are standing up'. Books and ideas are presented as invincible, 'You cannot kill a book / or the buzzing in it', and the desire for education is described as 'A murmur, a swarm', conveying the need to speak out and act as a group (as well as suggesting a strong and dangerous force). The sense of this battle needing to be fought is emphasised through the return to war imagery, 'take their places on the front line'.

Structure

The poem does not have a clear stanza structure and is written in free verse, perhaps to reflect the poem's themes of freedom (and the rebellion against traditional patriarchal structures).

Suggested questions

- What images of war or violence can you see?
- Where are these juxtaposed with images of everyday normality?
- How are the girls presented as hopeful and triumphant?

Other poems for comparison

- *Song of the Worms* – Margaret Atwood
- *Hey Baby* – Debra Bruce
- *If We Must Die* – Claude McKay

The Jewellery Maker – Louisa Adjoa Parker

Background

Parker is a writer of English and Ghanaian heritage who is interested in telling the stories of marginalised voices.

Key themes and images

The opening stanza introduces ideas of identity and place. Jewellery making is presented as part of the character's heritage ('like his father before him, and his father too'); it might also be linked to the economic necessities of running a family business.

Although unspecified, the place is described through the different senses of sight ('a plate-blue sky'), smell ('blossom'), touch ('heat-baked stone'), and sound ('the slap of sandalled feet […] a wild dog barks'). Alliteration helps to combine these images to create a vivid impression of the man's life.

The poet's focus on small details matches the man's occupation and this style of writing continues in the second stanza. The man's professionalism is indicated by the way he 'sits straight-backed'; his skill and precision are conveyed through the comparison to 'a surgeon', the simile about his tools as 'neat as soldiers', and the description of his 'deft' fingers. His talent is highlighted by the metaphors that make his creations appear alive in lines 10–12. The images of nature could link back to the idea that jewellery making is part of the man's heritage.

It is clear he enjoys his work. He 'greets / his neighbours with a smile' in stanza 1 and the pattern of three in stanza 2 ('likes hot metal, the smell, the way it yields / to his touch') builds up his pleasure, again using different senses.

The final stanza has a more thoughtful, slightly downcast tone. Despite working with gold and silver, it suggests he struggles financially. His wife wears 'simple' clothes and has 'only' one piece of jewellery which is 'plain […] worn thin'; she is also 'wrinkled by the sun', implying she works outdoors. He wishes to make their life better: 'decorate / his house in this, drape his wife in fine-spun gold'. This is emphasised by the poet's more positive language, 'clear-eyed […] unlined skin', to describe the women he imagines will wear his jewellery. In the final line, 'warming the metal his hands caress', the different connotations of the verbs could imply that (perhaps because of their wealth) the jewellery will never mean as much to the wearer as it means to him.

Structure

The three stanzas separate different aspects of the man's life. The poem is written in free verse with some enjambment, perhaps to mirror the creative art of the jewellery maker. However, the poem also contains a lot of caesura, interrupting the sense of rhythm in the lines; this might relate to how his life isn't as happy and free as it at first seems (the financial struggles that are mentioned).

Suggested questions

- What different impressions are we given of the jewellery maker?
- How are different senses used within this poem?
- How does the last stanza present different lives?

Other poems for comparison

- *The Diamond Cutter* – Elizabeth Jennings
- *Two Scavengers in a Truck* – Lawrence Ferlinghetti
- *Tich Miller* – Wendy Cope

With Birds You're Never Lonely – Raymond Antrobus

Background

Antrobus is a d/Deaf poet of English and Jamaican heritage. He often explores themes of communication, connection, and cultural inheritance. This poem begins with an everyday experience that connects with others, gradually becoming more philosophical.

Key themes and images

The poem opens with a d/Deaf person's experience of a coffeehouse. The secondary noises seem intrusive and make communication difficult: 'I can't hear the barista / over the coffee machine. / Spoons slam, steam rises'.

The speaker also makes non-verbal communication, 'I catch the eye', with another customer. They have a shared but unspoken interest: 'reading alone / about trees which is, incidentally, / all I can think about'.

The idea of connections is highlighted in the fifth stanza. The adjective 'alone' is repeated, showing a similar experience between the speaker and customer. Additionally, the first line of the couplet is still set in the coffeehouse while the second line begins the speaker's recollection (as if roused by the customer's book).

The forest is presented through metaphor ('sun-syrupped Kauri trees'), colours ('white tufts / and yellow and black beaks'), and sound ('blaring so loudly'). The noise makes the speaker turn off their hearing aid and this leads to another connection, this time with nature: 'I was tuned / into a silence that was not an absence.' Nature is shown to be a powerful presence rather than an 'absence', and the verb 'tuned' suggests coming into harmony with it.

The speaker finds the return of sound uncomfortable (similar to their coffeehouse experience): 'silence collapsed. / The forest spat all the birds back'. The speaker – because they are 'jealous' – makes a connection with the unhearing trees, impressed by their 'earthy […] endless […] sturdiness', trying to imagine 'what the trees / would say about us', and showing sympathy for how humankind cuts them down for paper.

The poem ends with a final connection. The speaker meets a 'young Maori woman' who can differentiate the sounds of each communicating bird (in contrast to how sounds overwhelm the speaker); this is part of her heritage, 'learned from her grandfather'. Her repetition of her grandfather's words, 'with birds you're never lonely', makes the speaker think of the trees in London. They are described as 'grey' and without 'family' (perhaps linking the lack of birds to increased urbanisation or pollution). The final line, 'the Gods they can't hold', may suggest that humankind doesn't respect nature enough (we see ourselves as gods rather than seeing it in the world around us).

Structure

The use of couplets highlights the poem's repeated motif of two different things connecting.

Suggested questions

- What different connections appear within this poem?
- How does the poem convey the aural experiences of a d/Deaf individual?
- Would our interpretation of the poem change if we did not know that the speaker is d/Deaf?
- How is nature presented in both a positive and a negative way?

Other poems for comparison

- *On Her Blindness* – Adam Thorpe
- *To Hearing Loss* – Ruth Arnison
- *It would be water* – Kathy Engel

A Portable Paradise – Roger Robinson

Background

Robinson was born in London. His parents were from Trinidad and they went to live there as a family after he was born. He returned to England when he was nineteen, initially living with his grandmother.

Key themes and images

The extended metaphor of a 'portable paradise' is used throughout. The poem appears autobiographical, so the later images of 'white sands, green hills and fresh fish' suggest this specific paradise is the poet's Trinidadian heritage and the memory of his childhood there.

Through the image of the speaker being able to 'carry it always / on my person', and the worry that others could try to 'steal it', the memories are shown to be an important part of his identity. A sense of privacy or intimacy is created by having this paradise 'concealed, so / no one else would know'; however, this could also imply feeling the need to hide his heritage because people do not value it or they expect social or cultural integration.

The second person, 'you', starts to be used in line 7. This could be the poet writing what his grandmother said to him or he could be directly addressing the reader, passing on her wisdom (another aspect of someone's heritage).

The phrases 'under pressure' and 'stresses are sustained and daily' describe the difficulties people can face in life (relating, perhaps, to the poet's own return to England and being Black British). The list, 'hotel, / hostel or hovel' uses nouns that display decreasing status, referring to financial difficulty or acknowledging that anyone can struggle in life regardless of their social status.

Lines 8–17 continue the 'portable paradise' extended metaphor by describing how it can be used to ease life's problems. The image of being able to 'empty your paradise onto a desk' suggests the need to surround oneself with one's heritage. Many imperatives are used to present his words as good advice. The verbs 'trace', 'smell', and 'hum' link to different senses to convey the power of memory and heritage, as if it is returning physically or can transport the mind.

The final lines, 'shine the lamp on it […] keep staring at it', suggest the importance of exploring and understanding one's heritage. The simile, 'like the fresh hope / of morning' suggests it brings inner strength and optimism while the reference to 'sleep' implies inner peace and calm.

Structure

Several aspects of the poem make it resemble a conversation. Starting with a conjunction ('And') suggests it is opening mid-sentence. This continues when the poet writes in the second person ('you'). Free verse (without a set rhythm or rhyme scheme) is also closer to natural speech.

Suggested questions

- In what ways might this seem more like part of a conversation than a poem?
- How is the speaker's 'portable paradise' made to sound powerful?
- According to the poem, why might one need a 'portable paradise'?

Other poems for comparison

- *Island Man* – Grace Nichols
- *Summer Farm* – Norman MacCaig
- *The Journey* – Mary Oliver

Like an Heiress – Grace Nichols

Background

Nichols was born in British Guiana in 1950. She lived in a small coastal village until the family moved to the capital, Georgetown, when she was eight. Guyana regained its independence in 1966 and Nichols moved to Britain in 1977. This poem is from a sonnet cycle, inspired by a return visit to Georgetown.

Key themes and images

The opening simile, 'like an heiress', summarises her appreciation of the richness of her Guyanese heritage. This is emphasised by the comparison to 'eye-catching jewels'. Revisiting her childhood is conveyed through the metaphor, 'the mirror of my oceanic small-days'.

However, 'But' signals a change in tone, indicating a problem (and emphasised by the non-standard manner of starting a sentence with a conjunction). Humankind's effect on nature is presented in the image of a 'lone / wave of rubbish' and built up through a pattern of three, 'car tyres, plastic bottles, styrofoam cups'.

Personification often suggests the importance of something or its equality with humankind. Here, the ocean is given 'moodswings' and described as having 'rightly tossed back' the rubbish, indicating we shouldn't be polluting the waters. There is a sense of absence in the poem ('deserted' and 'not even by a seabird') suggesting the wider effects of pollution on ecology. This may also be implied by the metaphor 'the sun's burning treasury' which could be a description of the beautiful weather or a foreboding allusion to rising global temperatures and the earth's diminishing natural resources. Similarly, the image of her 'gazing out at the far-out gleam of Atlantic' could suggest tranquillity or a consideration of the planet's future (what is "on the horizon").

Compared to line 1, a less contented simile, 'like a tourist', is used in line 11 to imply that Guyana is no longer the place it was or how she remembered it; only the hotel offers 'sanctuary', emphasising the idea of being an outsider.

The poem ends by considering 'the quickening years and fate of our planet', providing a pessimistic view of the future by acknowledging that climate change cannot be reversed. This is juxtaposed with the reference to 'air-conditioned coolness', perhaps implying humankind is ignoring the planet's problems (or accepting, rather than trying to solve, them).

Structure

The sonnet is a familiar form of love poetry, matching the poet's feelings about Guyana and the natural world. This also increases the surprise when the positive tone changes after line 3.

In a sonnet, the volta (or turn of thought) comes towards the end; Nichols does not follow this tradition, just as her sonnet is written in free verse rather than iambic pentameter with structured rhyme. This lack of convention could help to emphasise the disturbing tone that is being developed. It could also be seen as an expression of her Guyanese heritage (rebelling against traditional poetic structures in the same way the country rebelled against colonial structures).

Suggested questions

- Where does the tone appear to change in the poem?
- How is nature presented?
- How do different images explore pollution and climate change?

Other poems for comparison

- *Inheritance* – John Agard
- *Lament* – Gillian Clarke
- *We Have Everything We Need* – Selina Nwulu

Thirteen – Caleb Femi

Background

Femi was born in Nigeria; he moved to England when he was seven and grew up on London's North Peckham estate (where Damilola Taylor was murdered in 2000). Although a lyric poem, detailing a personal experience, it is written in the second person. This acknowledges how systemic racism is a shared experience for global majority people, as well as allowing white readers to put themselves in the speaker's position. The poet repeats the phrase 'you will', using modality to assert that racial profiling and "stop and search" are regular occurrences.

Key themes and images

The opening stanza establishes the situation of being victimised, making use of contrasting tones. The idea of being 'thirteen' yet mistaken for 'a man' seems ridiculous and this is emphasised by the phrase 'You'll laugh'. However, the verb 'cornered' creates a sense of threat while the repetition of his age indicates the speaker's desperation to be believed.

The speaker's nervousness is returned to in stanza 3 with the verb 'praying', as well as how he wishes to efface himself by appearing friendly, 'the warmth of your teeth', or harmless, 'powerless – plump'. The second image can also be interpreted as the officers enjoying his vulnerability, as if he is their prey. The metaphor at the end of the stanza links to police brutality and conveys the speaker's dread. This continues into stanza 4 when describing how, 'fear condenses on your lips'.

The present-day experience is juxtaposed with a seemingly more positive one from the past. Stanza 2 recalls a school assembly but a tone of irony is created by the evident hypocrisy of the police officer. Set against the other stanzas, his positive phrases like 'little stars' and 'supernovas' come across as insincere hyperbole. Similarly, the metaphor about the officer's smile (suggesting a sunrise) creates irony by indicating that the offered optimism never really existed.

The final lines of the poem highlight this irony by revealing that supernovas are 'dying stars' that will become 'black holes'. These images act as a metaphor for the speaker's fear about what might happen to him but also imply how the experience changes his outlook: he loses positivity, perhaps seeing himself as worthless or now hating the establishment.

Structure

The poem is written in free verse and features a lot of enjambment, increasing its resemblance to natural, everyday speech. This could be to highlight the situation's realism and regularity.

Suggested questions

- How does the speaker feel differently in stanza 2 compared to stanza 4?
- How do stanzas 1 and 3 convey power and weakness?
- How does this poem create empathy and sympathy for someone else's life?

Other poems for comparison

- *On Aging* – Maya Angelou
- *That a man approached you in a nightclub* – Kim Moore
- *All The Dead Boys Look Like Me* – Christopher Soto

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